

Civil War Book Review

Fall 2008

Article 15

Intensely Human: The Health of the Black Soldier in the American Civil War

Sally G. McMillen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

McMillen, Sally G. (2008) "Intensely Human: The Health of the Black Soldier in the American Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss4/15>

Review

McMillen, Sally G.

Fall 2008

Humphreys, Margaret *Intensely Human: The Health of the Black Soldier in the American Civil War*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, \$40.00 hardcover ISBN 9780801886966

The Health of the Black Enlisted

It is hard to imagine that any scholar today could research a topic on the Civil War that others have not addressed previously. Margaret Humphreys, Josiah Charles Trent Professor in the History of Medicine at Duke University, however, has done just that. In this brief, straightforward account, she examines the numerous health problems and high mortality that black soldiers experienced during the Civil War. Though rudimentary medical knowledge was in part responsible for extraordinarily high mortality rates throughout the war, black soldiers suffered ill health to a far greater degree and died at a far greater rate than did white soldiers.

Hardly surprising, though certainly shameful, was the indifference toward illnesses, infection, and battle wounds endured by black soldiers. Though they were less likely to die from battle wounds—most served on garrison duty rather than on the front lines—black soldiers succumbed at shockingly high rates, in disproportion to their numbers.

Humphreys offers several other reasons to explain these high death rates. Racism was widespread among Union officers and soldiers. Black soldiers had few advocates to expose their abysmal situation, thus inciting little public outrage. They often were stationed in the most insalubrious regions of the South. Tens of thousands of former slaves who fought for the Union had endured a lifetime of malnutrition. While in the Army, black soldiers typically consumed a poorer diet, and many wore inferior uniforms and received shoddier equipment than did white soldiers. Fewer physicians tended them when ill or wounded. Most Americans at this time embraced the idea that African Americans were

subhuman and that their bodies were distinct from those of whites. Thus they fell victim to many diseases that whites assumed they could, by nature, withstand. For instance, people at the time concluded that blacks could resist malaria far more readily than whites since the disease was so common in Africa and in the American South. This rarely proved to be the case, especially among black soldiers who resided in the North and had never been exposed to this disease. Wrongly assuming that all blacks had a natural resistance to malaria, physicians often failed to give them quinine, the only life-saving treatment at a doctor's disposal.

Intensely Human is at its best when exposing some of the horrific conditions that black soldiers endured. Perhaps the most shocking situation of all is Humphreys's description of black soldiers who were stationed in Louisiana and then sent to Brazos Santiago Island in Texas immediately after the war ended. There, overwhelming numbers suffered from scurvy, a disease with a known and effective cure—consuming fresh fruits and vegetables. Though produce supplies were available, indifferent or callous officers ignored the health problem. The number of sick black soldiers overwhelmed Texas hospitals, care was minimal, and food and clean water were limited or nonexistent.

Humphreys's depth of knowledge in modern medical science informs this book at every turn, allowing a reader to understand the physiological implications of what she reveals. Coverage is understandably spotty due to the paucity of known primary sources, but Humphreys has done an admirable job in culling from them every possible ounce of information. She never hides her own reactions and is openly critical of the mistreatment by and indifference of Union officers who could have done much to alleviate the horrendous conditions that black soldiers endured.

The Civil War remains the bloodiest and most deadly in our nation's history. As Humphreys reveals here, for the 180,000 African American soldiers who served so bravely, it was a virtual death trap.

Sally G. McMillen is the Mary Reynolds Babcock Professor of History and Department Chair at Davidson College, Davidson, NC.